

District of Columbia Department of Health

For Immediate Release
Friday, January 10, 2003

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Health Information Update #1

Conference Call Held to Discuss Recent Illegal Production of *Ricin* in the UK

On Thursday, January 9, 2003, a conference call was convened by Dr. Rick Niksa, Director of HRSA's Bioterrorism Hospital Preparedness Program, to update all state hospital bioterrorism coordinators about the ongoing events in the United Kingdom concerning the arrest of individuals illegally manufacturing *ricin*—a deadly toxin produced from the castor beans.

Acting Assistant Secretary for Public Health Emergency Preparedness, Mr. Jerome Hauer, reviewed known intelligence received from British and American sources confirming reports that British authorities earlier this week raided an apartment allegedly involved in the production of *ricin* toxin and possibly cyanide. At the time of the conference call, there was no information on the scope of manufacture; however, *it appeared an assassination purpose was operant*.

While US intelligence did not link these suspects to America, all hospitals should familiarize their staff about the symptoms and presentation of *ricin* and other toxins. Mr. Hauer reiterated HRSA's commitment to disseminate information in a timely and accurate fashion through the Health Alert Network to all hospital bioterrorism coordinators.

Addressing the smallpox liability issue, Mr. Hauer stated that no final decision had been made; however, he indicated that there is "movement on the liability issue" which may help alleviate the pressure on hospitals. He went on to say that a policy statement was expected within the next few weeks.

The current national threat assessment level has not been elevated, and there is no specific cause for alarm. Hospitals should continue to review their ability to diagnose and manage possible bio-agents and toxins, such as *ricin* and *botulinum*.

The DC Department of Health will continue to update all local hospitals as information becomes available. Questions and/or concerns are welcomed.

- **Facts and Information about Ricin.**